

QL

696

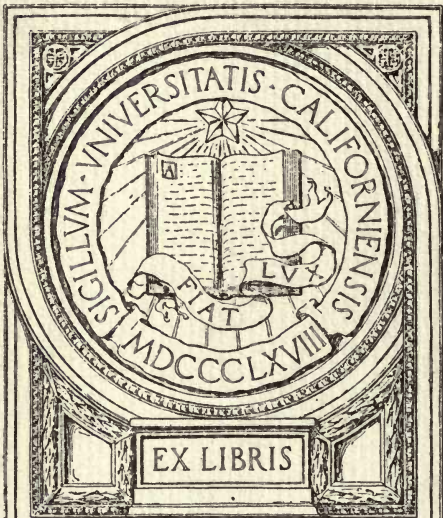
A3G8

/887

UC-NRLF



B 3 319 748



EX LIBRIS

BIOLOGY
LIBRARY
G

2
Lilla the Author's copy

NOTES ON THE ISLES OF SCILLY.

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

70 1000
1000 1000

II.

NOTES ON THE ISLES OF SCILLY AND THE
MANX SHEARWATER (*PUFFINUS ANGLORUM*).

BY J. H. GURNEY, JUN., F.L.S.

Read 25th October, 1887.

THE interesting paper in our Transactions by Mr. Edward Bidwell on the Birds of Scilly incites me, as a brother ornithologist, to transcribe the notes, or some portion of them, made during a very pleasant week, extending from May 10th to 16th, 1887, a period far too short to do more than taste the loveliness of these enchanting islands. The celebrated gardens at Tresco Abbey, on which the late Mr. Smith lavished so much money and care, were just then in all their spring beauty, with their wealth of Palms, Dracænas, Mesembryanthemums in profusion, flowering Arums, and green hedges of Escallonia, dotted with its flowers of red, dividing the Potato fields; in fact, much blossoms then, which is lost to those who only visit the islands in their July loveliness. Unfortunately, the Eucalyptus, which is the largest tree on the islands,* is dying, and many of the Nlexes and Pinasters are terribly injured in their tops by the salt spray and wind. The Sycamore seems to stand these enemies best, but has not been very extensively planted at present. The late Lord Proprietor left money for keeping up the gardens, and, under the watchful eye of the present owner and his gardener, Mr. G. D. Vallance, there is no fear of their deteriorating.†

Birds come in for a large share of the Lord Proprietor's attention, and the "List" alluded to by Mr. Bidwell is shown at the Abbey to any one interested. Some of the rarities, however, in this List, which is in manuscript (and has been drawn up by Mr. F. J. Jenkinson), were *seen*, not shot. The Rufous and Great

* And also the largest but one in Europe, Mr. Bidwell informs me.

† Photographs of them can be obtained of Gibson, at Penzance.

Reed Warblers alluded to therein (Bidwell, Trans. Norfolk and Norwich Nat. Soc. vol. iv. p. 204) were *seen* by a former keeper, David Smith. Mr. Jenkinson states that the former frequented a reed-bed below the Abbey road for about a fortnight, at the end of September, 1883. Smith, I was told, had a very good knowledge of birds, but, as it was not obtained, its identity can hardly be considered as proved.

Mr. Dorrien Smith has begun a collection of Scillonian Birds to which, since Mr. Bidwell's visit, has been added White's Thrush, (*Turdus varius*, Pall), shot by his butler, Mr. G. Britton, on December 2nd, 1886. This is the eighteenth British specimen. It frequented the Abbey garden for three weeks; November is therefore the month which should be accredited with it, and not December. Ten of the eighteen British specimens have been killed in January, and of two the date is not known. There is an undoubted tendency among birds of the eastern Palæarctic regions, when they do come here, to visit us about mid-winter. Its general haunt was, Mr. Britton informed us, the Long walk, among the Dracænas,—just the place which this ground-feeding Thrush would choose; in fact, from their habits in this respect, they have been more than once mistaken for Woodcocks.

The latest published List of the Birds of the Scillies is that by the Rev. R. W. J. Smart, contained in the Transactions of the Penzance Natural History Society for 1885—86; in which, besides his own observations, are incorporated those of Mr. A. Pechell, Messrs. J. H. and F. Jenkinson, and Mr. F. R. Rodd. It is not a lengthy article, and, did space allow, I should like to have made some remarks upon it, but fear, lest my pen should occupy more than its share of our Transactions. The Rufous and Great Reed Warbler are not included, and only two occurrences of the Grey-headed Wagtail, of which we saw a fine male, are given. It is doubtful if the Chough has ever been seen, and no Jay has ever visited Scilly, which is odd, as they are such well-known North Sea migrants, and occasionally occur on the island of Heligoland in great numbers.*

Strange to say, none of the old writers on the Scilly Islands, from Botoner (1478) to Borlase (1758—59), have anything to say about the Manx Shearwater (*Puffinus anglorum*, Tem.), and it is

* I saw a plumassier's shop there full of Jays' wings.

not certain that they even once allude to it. Willughby, who visited the Land's End with Ray, in 1662, heard that it was found on Scilly, a statement repeated by Pennant and Selby; but it was not until Mitchell's well-known narrative of the colony on Annet appeared in the first edition of Yarrell's 'British Birds,' that anything definite was known. This reticence was probably due to its peculiar habits. Botoner, after mentioning St. Mary's, says: "*Insula Rascow* [? Tresco] *pertinet abbati Tavystock, continet in longitudine 3 miliaria, et in latitudine 3 miliaria, inculta, cum cuniculis et avibus vocatis pophyns.*"* The reference here is, probably, to the true Puffin, though it may be to the Shearwater; but, apparently, the word "Puffin" is not in use among the natives now for either species. Botoner was no naturalist, and his references to birds are very scanty; in one place (p. 154), apparently referring to an island of the Scilly group, he couples Cormorants with Cats and Mice!†

Perhaps the most interesting bird at Scilly is the Manx Shearwater, and strange to say, of the forty islands which bear herbage, it inhabits only one—the island of Annet. Annet is said to be the only island where there are no Rats, which abound on most of them. Possibly the odour of the Shearwaters is distasteful, for they could certainly swim across from St. Agnes.‡ There had been a terrible robbery on Annet, a few days before our visit, of Shearwaters or their eggs, or both, and the south end of the island was dug over in all directions. Notwithstanding this, we had no difficulty in finding the objects of our search; indeed the ground was so honeycombed, that it was impossible in some places to avoid stepping on, and breaking into, their domiciles.

Mr. H. A. Macpherson, in a remarkably interesting paper, has fully discussed the question to what degree Shearwaters are nocturnal in the breeding season (Trans. Norfolk and Norwich Nat. Soc. vol. iv. p. 215), and I will only say that we observed one

* Itinerarium Willelmi Botoner, p. 98.

† Many early notices of Cornish birds are quoted or referred to in Mr. Harting's Introduction to the 'Birds of Cornwall.'

‡ The Rev. M. A. Mathew says there is a strong colony of Shearwaters on Skomer Island, Pembrokeshire, and no Rats. But the happy conjunction does not seem to have been noticed elsewhere. It is said, though it is unlikely to be true, that they were extirpated by Rats in Man.

issue *voluntarily* from its hole in the daytime, and that when leaving by steamer, we saw, a few miles to the northward of the Scillies, several small flocks, and a gathering of seventy or eighty, at about 10.30 a.m. Yet a person might sit down among their burrows upon the island of Annet and not know of their existence. Their plan of only leaving and entering these burrows after dark is a provision of nature for greater security, their eggs being so much easier to obtain than the Razorbill's, or the Guillemot's, hence these wise birds are careful not to draw attention to them by coming out of their holes in the daytime. It would take very little to extirpate a colony of Shearwaters such as that on Annet, and if they had not fortunately as warm a friend and guardian in the present Lord Proprietor as in the last, their days would soon be numbered. The recent robbery had been committed by some Tresco men, and Mr. Dorrien Smith speedily had the culprits found out and brought up before him. Alas! there appeared to be a fatality on the poor Shearwaters in 1887, for before they had time to recover, a wreck took place by the Bishop Rock, and sad havoc was made of the island of Annet by five hundred head of cattle, which were saved from the ship, and landed there. They trampled everything to pieces, broke in all the Shearwaters' holes, probably destroying many birds, and made a ruin of everything (J. H. J. and E. D. S. *in litt.*).*

The Scillonian name for the Manx Shearwater is "Crew;" while a Puffin is called a "Pope."† There is so much similarity between the words, that we cannot but think the "Creyser" of Richard Carew to be the Shearwater ('Survey of Cornwall' [1602] p. 35), all the more so that at various breeding stations it has had names bestowed upon it beginning with the letter C, indicative of

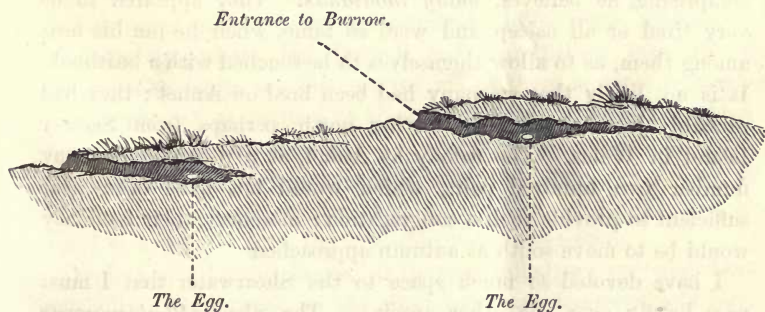
* On the 31st of March, 1871, there were ninety-nine Manx Shearwaters in Leadenhall Market, which showed by their clean plumage, and dislocated necks, that they had been caught in their burrows. Two of the salesmen said they came from Cornwall; and, I suspect, though it was contradicted in the 'Field,' that they had been stolen from Annet. I could not learn that they are ever eaten by the inhabitants of the Scilly Islands, either fresh or salted.

† Harting gives a list of Cornish names of Birds from the vocabularies of Borlase, Pryce, and Polwhele (*l.c.* p. 312), as well as a list of provincial names now, or formerly, in use (p. 314).

its note. Carew puts it between "Murres" and "Curlews," and reckons it among the "Citizens of the Ayre" which "serve for food to us." In the same list he distinguishes the Puffyn, and says it "hatcheth in holes of the clyffe."

On misty nights the "Crews" get the more bewildered of the two, and Mr. Vingoe says that one flew with such force against St. Agnes lighthouse as to break the glass. Adjoining St. Agnes is an island called Gugh, and this, if the wind be from the west, is in the line of flight of the Shearwaters. Captain White informed us that thirty-six had been picked up there in a day, and on proceeding to the spot we found twenty, besides the remains of five more. Some had broken necks, and most of them exhibited the marks of a violent blow, as if they had been dashed against the rocks.* No doubt this was the case, and probably the previous Monday night, May 9th, had been a fatal one to some of them, as it was very misty; and a serious collision between two vessels took place off the Land's End.

Our boatmen were of opinion that at Annet the Shearwaters made their own holes, and not Rabbits.† It would really require a series of section diagrams to give a true idea of the twists and turns which some of the holes take; but the accompanying woodcut shows two of the simplest drawn from memory, and these



* Bishop Stanley mentions two Shearwaters colliding with such force as to kill one another ('History of Birds,' p. 82), and one of them is in the Norwich Museum, to which it was presented by the late Bishop. See also Trans. Norfolk and Norwich Nat. Soc. vol. iv. p. 221.

† Professor Newton says Shearwaters make their own holes in St. Kilda (A. N. *in litt.*).

were burrows made by the Shearwaters I have no doubt. I think the egg is generally at the end of the burrow, and certainly the ceiling of the chamber in which it is deposited is sometimes not more than six inches from the surface. When taken out, the Shearwater makes no attempt to escape.

It is most likely, from Mr. Bidwell's observations, that they rake the hole out with the beak (*l.c.* p. 213); but I was so careful about not further disturbing them after the recent robbery, that my observations on their nesting arrangements were incomplete. At the southern end of Annet the rocks are overlaid with a thick bed of soil, partly peat, partly sand, which their hooked beaks, aided probably by their feet, easily make an impression upon. Debes says they use both ('*Færoa Reserata*,' p. 145), and his account, which Mr. Bidwell quotes, though printed more than two hundred years ago, is very faithful. This situation is quite unlike the place where they nidificate at Eigg, on the coast of Scotland, where Mr. Macpherson says they nest on cliffs from one to seven hundred feet in height (*l.c.* p. 216).*

Mr. Mitchell alludes to the Shearwaters' habit of occasionally congregating (Yarrell, '*British Birds*,' vol. iii. p. 570). In August, 1885, Captain White, of St. Mary's, saw a flock, mostly birds of the year, reaching *two miles* on the water, and comprising, he believes, *many thousands*. They appeared to be very tired or all asleep, and were so tame, when he ran his boat among them, as to allow themselves to be touched with a boathook. It is not likely that so many had been bred on Annet: they had probably just arrived from further north, perhaps from Scomer Island in Wales. The colony at Annet, at a rough guess, may number two hundred pairs, which would not have been near sufficient to provide such a congregation; moreover, their tendency would be to move south as autumn approached.

I have devoted so much space to the Shearwater that I must pass briefly over the other species. The Shag (*Phalacrocorax graculus*) is very common, and on Great Inisvouls we found about twelve nests with eggs, and one with young birds, which, on May 12th, was early. One youngster was blind, and the other two just able to see. Only two of the nests had three

*I have been favoured with a sketch of the exact place by Mr. Arthur Macpherson, which in every way agrees with his cousin's description.

eggs. The young ones were very noisy, which attracted our attention as soon as we landed. Their large seaweed nests were all out of sight, hidden away in the clefts of the rocks, but this was, I imagine, not so much for concealment as for protection from wind.

No Cormorants nest on Inisvoul, and, as far as our experience went, they are much less common on the Scillies than the Shag. Mr. Smart says "the Cormorant is the earliest sea-bird of all in commencing breeding," and that he had taken eggs "slightly incubated on March 14th" (*l.c.* p. 76); perhaps, therefore, they are earlier than the Shag. On May 30th Mr. Bidwell found young of both nearly ready to fly (*l.c.* pp. 206, 207), and by the same date those I found would have been quite as forward. The Cormorant is a greedy destroyer of fish: Shakespeare speaks of the

"Insatiate Cormorant,"

and Chaucer of

"The hote Cormorant full of gluttonie."

Yet, for all that, one is sorry to hear that Mr. Smart thought it necessary, in the interests of the fishermen, to shoot so many.

We found a fairly good supply of other sea-birds' nests, but there was too much wind to visit the outer islands, and it was disheartening to see over one hundred Gulls' nests robbed on Menewethan, where Mr. Bidwell had found them breeding in peace. The Gulls eat the corn (of which there is none too much on the islands), as testified by their ejected pellets, a practice which will bring them into disfavour. I saw it some time ago stated in the 'Field' that Gulls never eat corn, but that they do so in Scilly is an undoubted fact, and in the Orkney Islands too, as I can bear witness from the infallible test of dissection.

Puffins, or "Johnny Popes," as they are called, are very abundant on Scilly. Guillemots, on the other hand, are comparatively rare. My brother-in-law and I found several Oystercatchers' nests, and were surprised to see how high up on the rocks they were. It is said that in Lancashire they sometimes lay four eggs; but we did not find more than three. The Turnstone is extremely common, but never nests here. The Curlew is common, and nowhere are there tamer Purple Sandpipers than on the isles of the

"Cassaterides." Mr. Smart does not seem to have recognised the abundance of the Purple Sandpiper (*l.c.* p. 171), which we found very common, but no doubt in different seasons their numbers vary, as is the case with so many birds everywhere. We saw two Great Northern Divers in, apparently, complete breeding plumage: they seem to linger on the coast of Cornwall, for I remember, many summers ago, assisting in the chase of a pair in Falmouth harbour, and one of them, which succumbed to the aim of Mr. Howard Fox, was as perfect a bird as it was possible to have.

After leaving the islands, an hour was spent very pleasantly at Penzance with the veteran naturalist Mr. Vingoe, now over eighty years of age, who showed us the Yellowshank and American Solitary Sandpiper,—both shot by his son, of which he is, naturally, very proud,—the American Little Stint, Red-breasted Flycatcher,* Cream-coloured Courser, etc. He also produced a lovely Grey Phalarope *in breeding plumage*, adult, and far redder than any British specimen I ever saw, which from the circumstance of its having only one leg, is evidently the one shot at Par, recorded by the late Mr. Rodd ('Zoologist,' 1878, p. 255). As hardly any of Mr. Vingoe's rarities are labelled with date and locality, it is exceedingly probable that when he is gone the value of many of them, as local specimens, will perish with him. Indeed he has *already forgotten* the dates of most, although he can give the circumstances connected with their capture. I advised him to write what little he knew on the stands of all before it was too late, knowing that the identity of many a rare British bird has been irrecoverably lost, at the death of its owner, for want of this necessary precaution.

* I bought this Flycatcher, but on returning home, found it was unrecorded. Mr. Vingoe states that he received it from Scilly in the same parcel with Mr. Rodd's, both in the flesh. That would be in October, 1863. But Mr. Rodd's not having recorded it, if he knew about it, as Mr. Vingoe says was the case, is very unaccountable; and I am bound to add that a gentleman, who is the best authority on the birds of the Scilly Islands, suspects some mistake in the matter.

Gaylor
Ma
Syracu
PAT. JAN

Isles of Scilly and
the Manx shearwater

A3G8
BIOLOGY
LIBRARY
G

426599

QL696

A3G8

BIOLOGY
LIBRARY
G

Gurney

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

